
Poster Presentation

Comparing Student and Corporate Perceptions of the Need for English in the Workplace

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Introduction

Many Japanese students will say they “don’t like English”, and it is commonplace to see them trying to complete language requirements in university as soon as they can. This leaves them with an ability that lessens over time. They begin job hunting typically in their third or fourth year of studies, and some will encounter a need to provide TOEIC scores as part of the recruiting process. Science and engineering graduates have a recognizable need for using English in the workplace due to its function as a lingua franca. However, are these students aware of the need, even for jobs inside Japan? And, just what do companies announce about English language requirements during recruitment fairs?

Reports and newsletters from the Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC, the distributor of TOEIC in Japan) describe details on the numbers of companies that employ TOEIC for hiring, promotions, and overseas transfers. One has to look carefully at the data, however. For example, in their FY2011 statistics (IIBC, 2011b), they reported that 954 companies “used” TOEIC for “new recruits” (the full meaning of both expressions is unclear), and they showed various breakdowns of the data. Helpful information included numbers of test takers and scores by industry type. But, later in the same report, survey data are shown from a third or less of them (n=278-329), without qualifying differences from the original set (IIBC, 2011a). Another

report (IIBC, 2013) stated that 756 organizations used TOEIC and “roughly 70 percent of companies take TOEIC scores into consideration during the hiring process” (p. 1). The number of “provisional recruits” who take TOEIC is recently on the rise (7,746 in 2011, and 10,268 in 2013), so IIBC (2013) interpreted this as meaning “that students are better aware now, at the job-hunting phase, of the need for job-related [sic] and are making an enhanced effort to improve their English ability” (p. 1).

But is this really true? The vast majority of first-year students in my language courses indicate that they do not even know what TOEIC is. By their third year of studies, fewer than 10 students attend the TOEIC prep course offered at the university. In addition, the fact that most students complete their language requirements before the end of their second year, coupled with teacher observations from then to graduation showing a decline in their communicative abilities, strongly suggest otherwise to the IIBC statement. As added support for this contrasting situation, students at my university who opt for advancement to graduate school also demonstrate a significant drop in English fluency.

A survey was therefore conducted to determine the extent of science and engineering (S&E) university students’ awareness of the requirements for English in the workplace. To get a picture from the company side, employers were also polled on their employees’ workplace English language needs pre- and post-hiring, and on the various uses of English in the workplace. It was felt that if companies knew their employees needed English as an important component of their duties, they would announce that during recruitment.

Methods

In December 2012 recruiters from 89 Japanese companies visited Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine for a job fair which 200 students attended to gather information about prospective jobs. In separate surveys in Japanese, students were asked how prepared they felt about using English before and after they met with employers, and company representatives were asked to provide information on company profiles and the types and frequency of uses for English on the job.

Results

The response rate was 97/200 (48%) for students and 63/89 (71%) for employers. The student population consisted of 77% third-year students, 14% second-year students, and 6% from other years. Their majors are shown in Table 1. Employers representing six main economic sectors participated (Table 2), with manufacturing and retail being the two most common, selected from 18 categories (Naito et al., 2007). Not all did business in the S&E field, but a list of their names (kept anonymous from the survey itself) showed that more than half were in agricultural, medical, food-related, or similar fields. Companies without overseas offices ($n=39$) outnumbered those that have them ($n=24$). As for company size, the number of employees were >1000 ($n=19$), 101-1000 ($n=34$, with 18 in the 101-300 range), and <100 ($n=9$). One company did not report any number.

Before talking to recruiters, the majority of students reported that they felt that employers would say they needed English for work. On a 5-point Likert scale (90/97 students responded), the results comprised “all employers” ($n=4$), “most employers” ($n=40$), “some employers” ($n=30$), “few employers” ($n=12$), and “none” ($n=3$). However, despite an average of 4.6 interviews per student, no company verbally stated to students the need for TOEIC scores, and only an average of 1.16 employers were reported as providing information in writing

Table 1

Student Majors

Food Science	Life Science	Livestock Production	Agro-Environment	Agronomy	Other
29	25	16	15	7	1

$N = 97$; some students did not specify a major

Table 2

Industrial Profile of Companies

Manufacturing	Retail	Service	Agriculture	Banking and Insurance	Other
36%	22%	9.5%	6%	6%	<5%

about TOEIC requirements.

The company surveys agreed with this. No English language test scores of any kind were needed by 43 (68%) employers for hiring, promotions, and overseas transfers. Twelve more (19%) did not reply about transfers but said language test scores were not used for hiring and promotions.

Employers were asked to rank the most common uses for English in the workplace (Table 3). General English outweighed technical English in all four categories. Students responded similarly based on what employers told them.

Although only 32% of employers stated a need for an English test, and the actual workplace English needed was for general English situations, students reported feeling *less* prepared to use English in the workplace after they interviewed. Moreover, 19 companies (30%) had branch offices overseas—mostly in SE Asian countries, the U.S., or Australia—and only 14% of students said they wanted to work there (Table 4).

Table 3
Top 3 Uses for English in the Workplace

	#1	#2	#3
Reading	Email	Office documents	Journals
Writing	Email	Office documents	Journals
Speaking	Meetings & phone	Client talks	Conferences
Listening	Meetings	Phone calls	Client talks

No answer was given by 17 (27%)

Table 4
Student Desires to Work in or Outside Japan vs. Use English on the Job

Where would you like to work?	yes	no	unsure
Japanese company using English in Japan	20 (21%)	27 (28%)	45 (46%)
Japanese company using English outside of Japan	14 (14%)	40 (41%)	38 (39%)

Discussion and Conclusions

Reports on English in the workplace often state that many Japanese companies require TOEIC scores for hiring, promotions, and overseas transfers (Gilfert, 1996; Hamada, 2008; Rebuck, 2003; Saegusa, 1989; Seki, 2004; Shankar & Tokimatsu, 2006; Tokunaga, 2008; Tukahara, 2002), but just how many is “many”? This study shows almost none in a sampling of mostly S&E companies use TOEIC for these purposes. Moreover, tests such as TOEIC may be overused anyway and do not provide more than an example of passive language skills, which are not necessarily desirable in the S&E business (Hirai, 2009). Also, recent studies by Cowling (2007), Okada (2010) and Yamazaki (2008, 2009) suggest that teaching technical English should focus more on active communication skills such as writing emails and handling negotiations and telephone calls instead. Following intensive English courses in a corporate setting in Japan, feedback from company workers living abroad supports this (Tyndall, 2013), as well.

Student uncertainty in wanting to work for domestic vs. foreign branches of companies that use English (Table 5, “unsure” values of 46% domestic and 39% overseas) suggests that even at the middle of their third year of university, they have either not decided what they want for a career, or are hesitant to rule out either type of opportunity. It is also possible that they are not focused on a particular *job* from the onset, but rather would simply prefer to work for a *company* because of its image or reputation, much like the process employers themselves use to choose recruits based on their university’s status.

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Glen Hill has been teaching in Japan since 1998. He has taught in eikaiwa, private high school, and university. His research interests are extensive reading, ESP for science students, and technical writing. He currently shares a MEXT research grant to study motivation in science and engineering students in Japan. hill@obihiro.ac.jp

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